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Review of Joyce Carol Oates's *The Lost Landscape*

Eric K. Anderson
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Joyce Carol Oates has written an extraordinary number of exceptional novels, short stories, poems and plays. When she has written in her own unmediated voice it has usually been in the form of book reviews, essays, or extended non-fiction on subjects such as boxing or artists. Rarely does she write directly about her own personal life or development as a writer, with the notable exception of her memoir *A Widow's Story* (2011) about the death of her husband Raymond Smith, told mostly in journal form. So it's surprising and exciting that Oates has assembled various pieces of autobiographical writing to form this memoir about her childhood, *The Lost Landscape*.

The book is organized in roughly chronological order from Oates's earliest youth to the death of her parents in their old age. In one of the earliest sections Oates makes the stylistically-radical choice of narrating from the perspective of her pet "Happy Chicken." This is a highly playful and entertaining way of approaching the largely impressionistic memories she has of her earliest youth. However, this chapter also hints at the formation of some of Oates's most primal beliefs about the way gender roles and social relationships are played out in this tender portrait of family life. As with much of Oates's great literature, some of the most ardent power struggles in society are played out in micro form—in this case through the example of rural farming life.

Oates recollects powerful episodes about a neighboring family called the Judds. Unlike the relatively happy family unit found in Oates's household, the Judds were hampered by issues of alcoholism, spousal abuse, and severe poverty. Of course, at the time, these issues were not labelled as such. An attentive reader will see in this family and the Judd's daughter who was Oates's friend characteristics and conflicts found in much of the author's fiction. Oates points out that "they tell us everything about ourselves and even the telling, the exposure, is a kind of radical cutting, an inscription in the flesh." The struggles

and hardships of this specific family stand for something universal about the human condition. By witnessing and empathizing with such struggle we are changed and indelibly marked.

There is a confessional aspect to some chapters which concern enduring personal mysteries or things not often talked about among Oates's family. This includes an account of a college friend who was plagued by destructive insecurities and eventually committed suicide. The lingering pain is felt in Oates's emphatic connection to her lost friend: "*You are as much myself as another. You are myself.*" The sense of being a twin or the lucky half of a single being is felt even more intensely in the heartbreaking chapter about Oates's much younger and severely-autistic sister Lynn. This doubling is even more evident because the sisters possess such physical similarities and were born on the same day of the year. Oates reflects how her sister is "*A mirror-self, just subtly distorted. Sister-twin, separated by eighteen years.*" One could make connections between these autobiographical passages and Oates's frequent preoccupation with twins in her writing. More broadly, these feelings of empathy with those who are so similar to the author herself but who experienced a different fate reinforce Oates's message throughout her writing that our existence is so often determined by mere chance.

Some of the most endearing passages in this memoir are about Oates's burgeoning love of books. One chapter memorializes her experience of first being given an illustrated copy of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* by her grandmother, and in another chapter she recalls the excitement of receiving her first library card. Any lover of reading will connect to Oates's impassioned discovery of literature. Even when she tried to decipher books beyond her understanding she states: "Stubbornly I read even when I had only a vague idea of what I was reading." Part of the process of learning is humbling yourself before what you read, to argue with it and puzzle over the possible meanings. It's reassuring to discover that like all students Oates struggled with some literature, but she also found it exhilarating as she eloquently describes here: "It was thrilling to undertake such bouts of reading, as in a plunge into unfathomable depths of the ocean; it was thrilling and also terrifying, for at such depths one could not easily breathe, and the more desperate one was to concentrate one's thoughts, the more likely one's thoughts were to break and scatter like panicked birds from a tree." This intense engagement with literature sympathetically demonstrates why endeavouring to understand the world through books can be frustrating but can feel like the only thing an intellectually engaged person can do.

Oates raises questions about the nature of memory and the somewhat faulty medium of memoir writing to adequately represent the past. She states: "the effort of writing a memoir is so fraught with peril, and even its small successes ringed by melancholy. The fact is—*We have forgotten most of our lives. All of our*

landscapes are soon lost in time.” Therefore, rather than constructed as a straightforward narrative, the memoir is based around Oates’s recollections of members of her family, particular incidents, or significant objects such as photographs or letters which provide a touchstone to the past. One of the most intriguing and significant chapters, “Headlights: The First Death,” recounts a childhood obsession with sneaking out of her house in the middle of the night to sit by a roadside watching the lights of passing cars. In this section she gives a powerful meditation on the state of being alone and an observer of the world with all its stories and mysteries: “I love it that our lives are not so crudely determined as some might wish them to be, but that we appear, and reappear, and again reappear, as unpredictably to ourselves as to those who would wish to oppress us.” This is a tremendously empowering statement about the strength we can find in such solitude regardless of how others may perceive us.

The Lost Landscape gives a powerful depiction of the author’s early life, yet it is also a meditation on the process of writing itself and hints at reasons for Oates’s ardent engagement with writing as a form of memorializing the past. She notes the quixotic nature of her drive to create stories: “It may be that the writer/artist is stimulated by childhood mysteries or that it is the childhood mysteries that stimulate the writer/artist. Sometimes in my writing, when I am most absorbed and fascinated, to the point of anxiety, I find myself imagining that what I am inventing is in some way ‘real’; if I can solve the mystery of the fiction, I will have solved a mystery of my life. That the mystery is never solved would seem to be the reason for the writer’s continuous effort to solve it—each story, each poem, each novel is a restatement of the quest to penetrate the mystery, tirelessly restated. The writer is the decipherer of clues—if by ‘clues’ is meant a broken and discontinuous subterranean narrative.” There’s no doubt that these episodes from Oates’s early life influenced her writing. In fact, there are direct references to some of her greatest novels such as *them, I’ll Take You There*, *The Gravedigger’s Daughter*, and the author’s most well-known short story “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” Yet, more than any direct relation these experiences may bear on her writing, the author’s upbringing formed in her mind philosophical riddles about the nature of life. Oates’s ceaseless dedication to writing and her ever-evolving forms of storytelling demonstrate her continuous quest to probe and give a new slant to these unsolvable mysteries about identity and the past.